

CHAPTER XIII

THE ACTION OF THE 6TH/7TH AUGUST AT HELLES

(Sketch 13)

It has already been shown that Sir Ian Hamilton's plan demanded nothing more from the VIII Corps at the opening of the August offensive than a series of holding attacks.

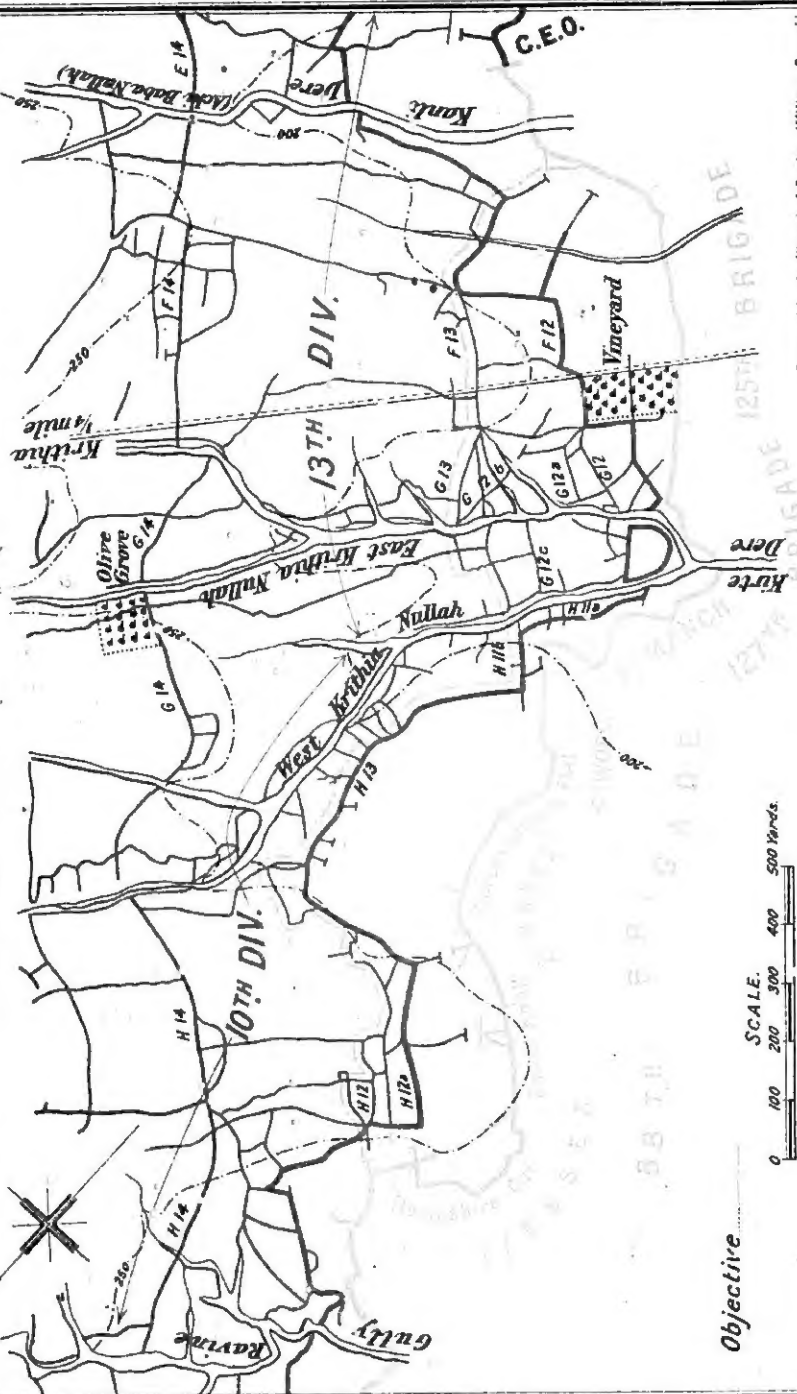
Sketch 13 The initial attack was to be a small operation to flatten out the Turkish salient astride the two forks of Kirte Dere. This entailed the capture of a network of short trenches and strong-points, on a frontage of approximately a mile. Owing to the limited amount of artillery available, the operation was divided into two halves. The northern half of the objective was to be captured by the 88th Brigade (29th Division) on the evening of the 6th. The southern half would be taken by the 125th and 127th Brigades (42nd Division) on the morning of the 7th. Both attacks would be supported, under corps arrangements, by every gun and howitzer that could be brought to bear, and also, under divisional arrangements, by fire from massed machine guns.¹ Naval support would be available once more, for the sailors, rising as usual to the occasion, had organized a squadron of special ships, more or less immune to submarine attack, to help the army with their fire.²

It was expected that by this method of dividing the operation into two halves the weight of artillery available would enable both parts of the objective to be taken with comparatively little trouble; and, in full anticipation of success, the VIII Corps had completed plans for further and more ex-

¹ The artillery available amounted to four 60-pdrs., 16 howitzers, eighty-four 18-pdrs. and ten 15-pdrs., in addition to six French howitzers and a Brigade of 75's. The 91st Heavy Battery R.G.A. (four 60-pdrs.) and the LXVI Brigade R.F.A. (sixteen 18-pdrs.) had reached Helles in the latter half of July, but all the guns of the former were out of action owing to trouble with recoil springs.

² This squadron, commanded by Rear-Admiral Stuart Nicholson, comprised the blistered cruises *Edgar*, five monitors and five destroyers, and mounted a total of 21 heavy and 24 light guns. See Appendix 6.

THE BATTLE OF 6TH/7TH AUGUST AT HELLES.



tended operations to be undertaken on subsequent days. So great, indeed, was the confidence at corps headquarters that the intentions of the Commander-in-Chief with regard to the limited rôle of the VIII Corps were apparently overlooked, and on the morning of the 6th August a special corps order referred to the early capture of Krithia and Achi Baba:

The attack to-day is the first stage of operations which will, it is hoped, at last carry us on to the position for which all ranks have so hardly fought since the landing. . . . It is now the beginning of a fresh year of war, and it is hoped that the advance of the VIII Corps will be the turning-point, and the capture of Krithia and Achi Baba the first steps towards the final victory.

These were rash words. In point of fact, the amount of high-explosive shell at Helles was entirely inadequate for even the first day's task.

Here it should be noticed that since the invaliding of General Hunter-Weston the VIII Corps had had only a titular commander. It was commanded for a few days in July by General Stopford, who had only just arrived from England, and knew nothing of local conditions. After Stopford's departure to open his own corps headquarters at Imbros, Major-General Douglas of the 42nd Division had assumed temporary command.¹ Thus throughout the preparations for the attack, and during the actual fighting on the 6th and 7th August, an unusual amount of authority was wielded by the senior staff officer of the corps, Br.-General H. E. Street, who had been General Hunter-Weston's right-hand man since the 25th April. This very capable officer had one blind spot: he could not bring himself to admit the increasing difficulties that confronted the troops at the southern end of the peninsula.

The function of a staff officer is to assist his chief, and to advise when asked to do so, but the responsibility for decisions belongs to the chief alone. For this reason a staff officer's opinion is often more care-free than that of a commander, and many a chief of staff might find his confidence abating were he suddenly to find himself placed in high command.

For the attack on the afternoon of the 6th August, Br.-General D. E. Cayley (88th Brigade) had the 4/Worcestershire on the right, the 2/Hampshire in the centre, the 1/Essex on the left, and the 1/5th Royal Scots in brigade reserve. The task of the Worcestershire was limited to the capture of the Turkish

¹ Lieut.-General F. J. Davie, the corps commander designate, reached Imbros on 5th August, but, as operations were imminent, the Commander-in-Chief decided that he should not assume command till the first battle was over.

front-line trench H13. It was a difficult task, however, for here the breadth of No Man's Land was at least 300 yards, and the assaulting troops were likely to be enfiladed from both flanks. To protect their right as much as possible, it had been arranged that one battalion of the 42nd Division (the 1/5th Manchester Regiment) should simultaneously advance against two small trenches on the right bank of West Krithia Nullah,¹ called H11a and H11b.

The task of the 2/Hampshire, in the centre of the line, was more difficult still. The battalion's objective included two lines of trenches and a formidable strong-point. On the left, the 1/Essex had a shorter distance to go, and could attack its objective from two sides. But the Essex, too, had a double row of trenches to capture, including a small redoubt.

The heavy artillery was to begin a slow bombardment at 2.20 P.M.; the field artillery and the machine guns were to join in an hour later; and the infantry assault was to be launched at ten minutes to four.

The morning of the 6th August was fine and clear, with scarcely a breath of wind. The 1/5th Manchester had moved into the front line overnight, and soon after daybreak the 88th Brigade filed up the communication trenches to relieve the 86th Brigade in the battalion sectors known as Hampshire Cut, Essex Knoll, and Worcestershire Flat.²

By 8 A.M. the assaulting troops were all in their assembly positions, and then followed a wait of over seven hours for the moment of assault to arrive. The day was oppressively hot, and there was little or no shade. All ranks, however, were in good spirits. In the 88th Brigade the three assaulting battalions

¹ The two branches of Kirtle Dere—known as West and East Krithia Nullahs—were both about 15 to 30 feet wide, with steep banks, in places from 10 to 20 feet high. The beds of these nullahs were practically dry.

² From an early date the VIII Corps adopted a very convenient method of naming the Turkish trenches. These were numbered serially, with a distinctive alphabetical prefix to denote the area to which they belonged. But no similar system was used for the British line, and the student who is accustomed to any of the orderly systems eventually evolved in France is bound to be somewhat confused by the names on the Gallipoli trench diagrams. An attempt to describe the derivation of British trench names would need a book to itself, and it must suffice to say here that at Helles each battalion sector of the front line was generally given a distinct name. These would often be taken from the name given to some point in the sector by the troops who originally occupied it. Looking at the map to-day it is easy to imagine that names like "Border Barricade" and "Hampshire Cut" commemorate brave deeds by the regiments concerned, but it is not so easy to realize that they designated portions of fire trench. But in 1915 the position of all these trenches was well known to the troops at Helles, with plentiful sign-posts for the new-comers, and the name of, say, "Essex Knoll" for a fire trench caused no more confusion than that of Haymarket or Knightsbridge for a London street.

had lately been brought up to war strength with well-trained drafts from home,¹ and each battalion was going into action with 24 officers and over 800 men. Encouraged by this recent accession of strength, braced by their short rest at Mudros, and heartened by the corps belief that Achi Baba could really be captured at last, the "old hands" of the brigade were quietly confident about the relatively small task required of them that day.

The Turks had been unusually quiet of late in the Helles sector, and their only activity since the beginning of the month had been a half-hearted raid on the British line at Fusilier Bluff on the morning of the 2nd August. But their silence can now be explained: they were saving ammunition for the big attack they had long been warned to expect. No hint had yet reached them that an attack at Helles was imminent, but all preparations had been made to meet eventualities and the Turkish battle-front in the south was well organized and prepared.² It is now known, moreover, that the trenches astride the Krithia nullahs were regarded by the Turks as the most likely locality for a small British attack.

Within a few seconds of the opening of the British bombardment it was answered by heavy and sustained fire from the enemy's batteries.³ Considerable casualties were sustained in the crowded British trenches; all the telephone lines from battalions to brigade were cut; communication trenches were badly knocked about; and two British guns were put out of action. General Davies,⁴ who was watching the operation as a spectator, has placed it on record that, fresh from the Western front, he was "horrified at the total inadequacy of the British "bombardment".

Punctually at 3.50 P.M. the infantry surged forward to the assault. For the first few seconds all appeared to be going well. The troops in the centre disappeared over the low crest about fifty yards beyond the British line with practically no loss; the Essex on the left and the Manchesters on the right were seen to reach the nearest Turkish trenches with hardly a casualty; and watchers in rear were soon reporting that the objectives had all been taken.

¹ No drafts had arrived for the 1/5th Royal Scots (T.F.), and this battalion still consisted of only two companies.

² The Turks appear to have been holding their southern front with 5 divisions (4 in line and 1 in support), totalling about 40,000 rifles. A sixth division was in reserve near Serafim Farm.

³ The Turks claim to have had 62 field and mountain guns in action, and 32 medium and heavy pieces.

⁴ The commander designate of the VIII Corps.

But the truth, as soon realized by 88th Brigade headquarters, though not by higher formations till many hours later, was altogether different. The strength of the Turkish defensive organization had been gravely miscalculated. A few minutes after zero hour the 88th Brigade had been shattered.

By a counter-attack from West Krithia Nullah the Manchesterers on the right were soon driven from the trench which they had captured. On the left the Essex came under a withering fire as soon as they tried to move forward from the Turkish front line, and after losing very heavily, especially among their officers, were forced to give ground.

In the centre, long before the Worcestershire and the Hampshire could cross the broad expanse of No Man's Land in front of them, the Turks had re-manned their positions,¹ and the troops were met by a devastating machine-gun fire from the front and both flanks. Very few unwounded men succeeded in reaching the enemy's trenches, and those who did were soon attacked by overwhelming numbers. At the end of an hour the only British still holding out in this part of the line were 30 men of the Worcestershire under a sergeant. Their numbers dwindled; and after nightfall the twelve survivors withdrew to their own lines.

The Turkish position was now everywhere intact except on the extreme left, where some of the Essex, under Captain H. R. Bowen, clung to a corner of Hiza till relieved an hour before dawn by two platoons of the Dublin Fusiliers.

The casualties of the 88th Brigade amounted to nearly 2,000 out of the 3,000 engaged.

Br.-General Cayley was early conscious of the failure of the attack; but, in the absence of detailed news, his reports were not credited, and at divisional and corps headquarters it was long before this grave situation was fully realized.² So few officers amongst the attacking troops were still alive that no messages were coming in, and it was only when wounded and unwounded began to trickle back after dark that it became possible to piece together an intelligible story from their disjointed and contradictory reports.

At 7 P.M., believing that the Essex and Worcestershire were in possession of a large portion of their objectives, General de Lisle decided to capture the intervening portion of

¹ During the bombardment the garrisons of the trenches had taken cover in the deep nullahs.

² Corps headquarters had informed divisional headquarters that they knew the Turkish front line had been captured, as their forward observation officers could see the British "metal discs" (see page 86) all along the trench. Actually the wearers of these discs were dead.

the Turkish line, including the strong-point to the left of the Worcestershire objective, with a night attack by the 86th Brigade.¹ Thereupon the brigadier of the 86th went forward to the advanced headquarters of the 88th, sent for the commanders of the Royal Munster and Royal Dublin Fusiliers, and told them to take their battalions to the old British front line, and to be ready to assault at 9.30 P.M., after a short artillery bombardment; the actual hour of attack to be notified later. At 8.30 P.M. it was decided to postpone this attack till half past ten. Orders to this effect reached the battalions concerned at nine o'clock.

Up in the front line, however, and in all communication trenches, the situation was chaotic, and it was impossible to form up for attack. The trenches were blocked with wounded, and by this hour only 50 men of the Munsters had reached the front line. To Lieut.-Colonel G. W. Geddes, commanding that battalion, it was clear that an attempt to attack could only end in failure, and he assumed the responsibility of reporting this to the brigade:

O.C. 1/Royal Munster Fusiliers to Brigade-Major 86th Bde.

9.10 P.M. I can only get one company into the front line. There is no room to get another man in owing to congestion due to number of wounded Worcestershires who are coming in over the parapet every minute. Apart from that both Hants and Worcs officers report that position to be taken will be bound to entail enormous losses and that the result will be very doubtful of success. Am I to continue (preparations for) attack? I have informed O.C. Dublins.

The brigade-major replied:

The attack will take place as stated in my B.M. 2050 at 10.30 P.M. The fact of another regiment being unable to take the enemy's trenches is no reason for the Royal Munster Fusiliers being unable to take them.

The brigade-major's irony, however, had no effect on the battalion commander, who by this time was evidently more sure than ever that, at all costs to himself, he must get the attack postponed. At 10 P.M. he wrote again:

The chaos is indescribable. I have only 50 men of my battalion with me. I cannot state when I shall be ready to attack. The firing line is subjected to heavy rifle and machine-gun fire. The

¹ The 86th Brigade was in divisional reserve. The 87th Brigade was holding the line on Gully Spur. The 52nd Division and Royal Naval Division were in corps reserve.

left of the Worcestershire is uncertain. I have informed the Dublins I am not ready to attack, and not to do so till I inform him that I am.

This message had some effect. At 10.42 P.M. the 86th Brigade replied:

My B.M. 2050 is cancelled. The time for the attack will be given later, but it will not be before midnight. Meanwhile the men should take as much sleep as possible.

By this time important information had been gained by the 1/5th Manchester on the right. Earlier in the evening that battalion had been ordered to make another effort to gain its morning's objective, and to link its left with the Worcestershire in H13. The new effort to gain H11b had ended in another failure, but a daring reconnaissance had subsequently discovered that H13 was occupied throughout its length by Turks, and the officer in charge of that reconnaissance, on his way back across No Man's Land, had fallen in with the small party of Worcestershire who at that moment were slowly creeping back to the British line.

On receipt of this news General de Lisle decided at 3.15 A.M. that the projected attack by the 86th Brigade, already twice postponed, should be finally abandoned.

This was a wise decision. An attack that night on the unbroken Turkish line would probably have ended in the destruction of the 86th Brigade, and in the resulting confusion the British trenches in that sector would have been dangerously exposed to counter-attack by the Turks. In point of fact the Turks did attack from H12a at daybreak; they drove in the small party of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers holding a corner of that trench, and obtained a footing in Hampshire Cut. But they were ejected, and the line was restored by the Dublins, supported by two companies of the Lancashire Fusiliers, at a cost to these two battalions of 240 casualties.

The first report to reach G.H.Q. of the utter failure of the Fielies attack was a message from VIII Corps received at 6.35 A.M. on the 7th. The news was a bitter disappointment; but the message added that the second half of the attack, by the 42nd Division, had not been cancelled. This was taken to mean that there was no cause for anxiety, and Sir Ian Hamilton did not intervene. Certainly an attack by the 42nd would minimize the risk of the 29th Division being counter-attacked while its line was still disorganized; and, provided the situation at Helles was well in hand, the VIII Corps could best assist the northern operations by continuing to press the Turks in the southern zone.

Unfortunately for the British, however, their sacrifice at Helles the previous evening had not achieved the results hoped for. It is now known that Liman von Sanders, in view of the serious threat at Anzac and Suvla, decided at daybreak on the 7th that risks must be accepted at Helles, and ordered the Southern Group commander—despite the latter's vehement protests—to send his reserve division to reinforce the northern zone with all possible speed.

The frontage to be attacked by the 42nd Division, temporarily commanded by Major-General W. R. Marshall, measured only 800 yards, but as the division was far below its war strength the attack was to be made with two brigades in line. The 127th (Manchester) Brigade (Br.-General Hon. H. E. Lawrence) was on the left, the 125th (Lancashire Fusilier) Brigade (Br.-General H. C. Frith) on the right, and the 126th Brigade (Br.-General Viscount Hampden) in divisional reserve. The objective of the division was the main Turkish support line, F13—H11b. The enemy's defensive system in this part of the line was very intricate, and there was a labyrinth of small trenches near the Krithia nullahs, on the front of the 125th Brigade.

The arrangements for the attack, which was launched at 9.40 A.M., were similar to those described for the 88th Brigade. There was a similar artillery preparation, a similar massing of machine guns to support the advancing troops; and some recently arrived trench mortars, under Captain T. Syers, R.A., were to join in the preliminary bombardment. The plan had been carefully explained to all ranks, and no step neglected that could help to ensure success.

But the results of the attack were as disappointing as those of the day before. On the left, the 127th Brigade could make no progress, and by noon, after suffering heavy casualties, the troops were back in their old lines. Early in the afternoon Br.-General Lawrence was obliged to report his brigade as temporarily unfit for further offensive effort. Its total strength amounted to only 28 officers and 700 men, or roughly that of a battalion.

On the right, where the Turkish position was weaker, the four battalions of Lancashire Fusiliers at first made some progress, and small parties of the 1/6th and 1/7th Battalions, under Major W. J. Law, succeeded in reaching the enemy's second line. But the Turks drove them back with a counter-attack, and by midday the only portion of the captured position still in British hands was a small vineyard west of the Krithia road, behind the Turkish front line, and a short length of

trench on either side of it. During the afternoon further efforts were made by the Fusiliers to recapture some of the lost ground, but in each case they were again forced to retire.

At nightfall the troops in the vineyard were still holding out gamely, but everywhere else the 125th Brigade was back in its own lines. The divisional commander at first ordered a withdrawal from this advanced and very exposed position in the vineyard. The trenches were narrow and blocked with dead and wounded, and very difficult to hold. Moreover, the position was a pronounced salient, protected on one side by only a few posts, and General Marshall feared that if the garrison was eventually driven out, the troops holding his old front line might become involved in the retirement. On learning, however, that the abandonment of the vineyard would mean leaving a number of wounded men behind, and that the officer in command was sure he could hold it, he gave him permission to try.

Not only that night but for several days the Turks made constant efforts to recapture this outlying point, but parties of the 1/6th and 1/7th Lancashire Fusiliers, reinforced later by detachments from the 1/6th East Lancashire and the 1/9th and 1/10th Manchester,¹ continued to defend it with great determination, and it was eventually incorporated in the British line.²

But the attack on the 7th had again been very costly. The casualties of the 42nd Division amounted to over 1,400 men in the two attacking brigades. In less than 24 hours, in a limited attack on a front of one mile, three brigades of the VIII Corps had lost nearly 3,500 of the 4,000 officers and men which an earlier calculation had laid down as the maximum that the whole corps could afford to lose in a series of operations to help the main offensive.³ The omens from the Helles sacrifices had not been propitious.

The full extent of these losses was not yet dreamed of at corps headquarters. But, on hearing at midday on the 7th

¹ Lieut. W. T. Forshaw, 1/9th Manchester, was awarded the V.C. for conspicuous gallantry.

² The northern edge of the vineyard was lost again on the 12th, and a trench dug across its centre became the British front line.

³ Casualties:

	<i>Officers.</i>	<i>Other Ranks.</i>
29th Division, 6th Aug.	54	1,851
42nd " 6th, 7th Aug.	80	1,484
	<hr/> 134	<hr/> 3,335

According to Turkish official figures the Turkish losses in the south, 6th-13th August, amounted to 7,510.

of the almost complete failure of the 42nd Division attack, Sir Ian Hamilton determined that no further risks must be run by the Helles garrison. The vital consideration now was that the VIII Corps must not be allowed, by further costly attacks, to jeopardize its ability to hold its existing positions without outside help. Orders were issued that the Helles garrison was to undertake no more offensive operations till the march of events in the north had automatically weakened the Turkish southern line.

Next morning, as the operations planned by General Douglas were deemed to have ended, General Davies assumed command of the VIII Corps.

For the rest of August—and indeed, as events subsequently shaped themselves, for the rest of the campaign—the British and French troops in the south were destined to make no further serious attacks.¹ The Turks similarly remained on the defensive, and, except that the 52nd Division succeeded in straightening out its line to the west of the vineyard in November, the opposing fronts at Helles remained virtually unchanged from the 8th August till the final evacuation exactly five months later.

Despite the failure of the operations at Helles, it is now known that they were not without their effect on the commander of the Turkish Southern Group, and that the VIII Corps staff on the 8th August were closer than they knew to the realization of their hopes. Wehib Pasha, as we have already seen, had protested strongly against the withdrawal from his command of his only reserve division. On the following day his German Chief of Staff took so serious a view of the British main attack in the north, and of the apparently imminent danger to the Southern Group of losing its communications, that he personally urged Liman von Sanders to abandon the southern zone, including Achi Baba, and to transfer all the troops south of Kilid Bahr to the Asiatic shore "while there is "still time to extricate them"

But Liman von Sanders was made of sterner stuff. He replied that not one yard of ground was to be surrendered voluntarily, and the Chief of Staff was replaced.

¹ For gallantry during a bombing affray on 13th August, Pte. D. R. Lauder, 1/4th R. Scots Fus., was awarded the V.C.